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Buffalo Bill, Showman

“Here he comes!”

The cry rings from a thousand throats and in the grandstand all eyes are focused on the lone horseman who gallops at breakneck speed around the huge arena. With what ease and rhythm of motion he rides: the identity of man and horse seem to blend in one harmonious unity! Then, suddenly, with a jerk that brings his horse up rearing, front legs pawing the air, Buffalo Bill pulls up before the grandstand, sweeps off his hat with the grace of a Sir Walter Raleigh, and gives his famous “salute from the saddle”.

“Ladies and gentlemen, permit me to introduce to you my Great Wild West Show and Congress of Rough Riders of the World.”

A moment's dramatic pause, then a blare of bugles, and a rush of cowboys, scouts, and Indians, whooping and swinging their hats as they ride with reckless abandon. Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show has begun.

About thirty-five years before, in Dennis Barnes's pasture near Le Claire, Iowa, another Wild West show occurred. The exhibition was not so pretentious, for one old black mare had to provide enough “spirit” and “whirlwind speed” for the whole performance; and three little boys took turns being

cowboys, Indians, and audience, but they more than supplied in enthusiasm what they lacked in volume of "whoops" and "yells". Seven-year-old William Frederick Cody, who suffered his mother to call him "Willie" but who was hailed as "Bill" or "Billy" by the boys, rode the black mare at a gallop, standing erect on her back for the edification of his comrades, Joe Barnes and Charley Emeigh.

Billy's father, Isaac Cody, had migrated to Iowa from Ohio several years previous, following the Mississippi to Parkhurst in Scott County, where he had landed, choosing a well-wooded tract of land close to the river as the site of his future home. There Billy was born on February 26, 1846, and the Mississippi early assumed importance in the background of his life.

During the summer of 1847, when he was a little over a year old, two girls who were visiting the Codys, took him and his sister, Julia, out on the river in a small skiff. It was not long before the girls began to lean over the side and splash the water with their hands. What fun they had, until the boat upset. Fortunately, Mr. Cody had sent the hired man along to watch them, but Julia and Billy were both nearly drowned when he carried them out of the water.

Another day, when Billy was a few years older, he took an old-country silver piece, that belonged to his mother, down to the river—a strictly forbidden act. Suddenly he yelled, "I've dropped it!"

I've dropped it!" Then, prevailing upon four or five of his companions to help him find it, he let them do the work while he directed the search. Sammy, his older brother, ran to tell their mother.

"Willie, come here", she called from the clearing, with a punitive tone in her voice.

Willie went obediently. Facing her calmly, he took the silver piece out of his pocket and handed it to her. "Aw, I was only teachin' the boys to hunt gold here like they do in California", he protested.

Billy probably got the inspiration for his "gold-hunting" expedition from his parents' talk of the great gold rush. Indeed, his father had started for California in 1850, but was forced to abandon the trip. Mr. Cody's adventurous spirit soon impelled him to move farther west, however. When Billy was eight, the family belongings were packed in a covered wagon, and they all set out for Kansas to seek their fortune in a newer country.

The last few weeks before their departure were spent in visiting at the Barnes home in Le Claire, where Billy and Joe Barnes had many good times together. Riding the old black mare was only one of their diversions, however. At other times they would steal down to the river and go swimming under the "Green Tree". Billy, being a country boy, was the subject of many pranks. The town boys tied his clothes in hard knots and played all sorts of jokes on him. But Billy was able to take care of himself, for he was unusually tall and strong.

All too soon came the time to start for Kansas, and bid their friends good-bye. For Billy, there was a thrill in the thought that he was to drive one of his father's teams. This bright-eyed, black-haired lad could manage a team of horses as well as a grown man; and as his older brother had been killed by a fall from a horse two or three years before, Billy considered himself second in command.

Weston, Missouri, one of the gateways to Kansas, was their first objective, for there lived a brother of Mr. Cody. After a thirty-day journey, which was a constant delight to Billy, the family arrived at Weston, where Mrs. Cody and the girls remained while Billy and his father went on to Kansas to pick out a claim and establish a trading post.

Having located in Salt Creek Valley, one of Mr. Cody's first acts was to trade some merchandise for an unbroken pony for Billy. About that time some trappers camped in the vicinity and Billy cultivated their acquaintance. One of them, a splendid horseman, offered to break the pony for him. To their mutual surprise, this frontiersman discovered that Billy's father was his uncle. Thereafter, he and Billy spent many happy hours together, and many were the useful lessons in horsemanship that Billy learned from him.

Meanwhile, the Territory of Kansas had been opened for settlement and as soon as a cabin could be built, Mrs. Cody and the other children came on from Weston. Billy spent much of his time learning

to speak Kickapoo from the Indian children and listening to wonderful tales of adventure on the wide plains beyond. When he was ten, he saw his father, an avowed "free-soiler", stabbed in a drunken mob of pro-slavery men. During the months that followed, Billy received his first training as a scout, for he had to be constantly on guard against raids by his father's enemies. In the following spring of 1857, Mr. Cody died as a result of that wound and continual persecution.

Left fatherless at eleven, Billy, who could ride and shoot like a man, assumed a man's responsibilities. He obtained a job herding cattle for the firm of Russell, Majors and Waddell, who had contracted to carry supplies to the soldiers at frontier posts. For this work he received his food and forty dollars a month, the wages being paid to his mother while he was gone. The trip was full of excitement, but no particular danger was encountered until one day when the outfit was "nooning" at Plum Creek. Suddenly there was a sharp Bang! Bang! and a thunder of hoofs.

"Indians!" cried one of the men. "They've shot the herders and stampeded the cattle! Get under the banks of the river, boys—use 'em for breast-works!"

Quickly the men obeyed orders and all afternoon they followed the bed of the river as rapidly as possible toward Fort Kearney. In many places the water was waist-deep to Billy. Gradually he fell

behind, and when night came he was dragging along, one weary step after another, utterly exhausted, but still clinging tenaciously to his old Mississippi Yaeger rifle which carried a ball and two buckshot. The men ahead were almost out of hearing when, by the light of the moon, Billy saw the figure of an Indian on the river bank with his rifle pointed toward the river bottom below and Billy knew that in another minute the Indian would shoot one of his friends. Without stopping to think, he raised his rifle and fired. Down tumbled the Indian into the water. The men ahead, hearing the shot, came running back and when the first one came upon the Indian in the water, he called back, "Hi! Little Billy's killed an Indian all by himself!"

Of course when the news of Billy's exploit reached home, he was the envy of all the boys in the neighborhood. More than ever he was persuaded that life on the plains was the life for him.

The next summer he joined the wagon train again. On that trip the Mormons attacked them and took all their guns and horses. Though only twelve, Billy walked the thousand miles back home with the rest of the men. In the summer of 1859, however, the train reached Fort Laramie without mishap. As there were nearly four thousand Sioux, Cheyenne, and Arapahoe Indians encamped near the post, Billy played with the boys and picked up a knowledge of their language which later proved of great value to him. When he returned to Fort Leavenworth that

summer, he had earned nearly a thousand dollars for his mother.

During the months that followed, he participated in the Pike's Peak gold rush, and went on a trapping expedition with a friend; but in April, 1860, Russell, Majors and Waddell organized the famous "Pony Express" and Billy obtained a job as rider. Excitement was plentiful during the two years of his service as a Pony Express rider, and he had ample opportunity to test his skill in riding and shooting.

He had promised his mother that he would stay out of the war, but after her death in December, 1863, he enlisted as a private in the Union Army and was able to lend valuable assistance as a guide and scout. It was during a thirty-day furlough in St. Louis in the spring of 1865, that Bill met and fell in love with Miss Louisa Frederici. On March 6, 1866, they were married, and their honeymoon was a boat trip up the Missouri River to Leavenworth, where they planned to begin housekeeping in Bill's old home.

For a short time after his marriage, Bill Cody ran a hotel in Salt Creek Valley, but his adventurous nature rebelled at this quiet existence. Again he resumed his work as a guide and scout for the government at the military post at Ellsworth, Kansas.

About 1868, Bill met a man named William Rose, a contractor on the Kansas Pacific Railroad, who persuaded him to speculate in real estate in a town

to be built near Fort Hays on the line of a proposed railroad. Bill's hopes were high for the fortune he was going to make selling building lots in "Rome". Unfortunately for their plans, however, the railroad staked out the town of Hays City, about a mile east of Rome and the potential citizens of Rome settled there. Cody and Rose found their site deserted and their pocketbooks empty, whereupon Bill accepted a contract with the railroad as a buffalo hunter.

It was through this occupation that he received his sobriquet of "Buffalo Bill". But his claim to the title was challenged by friends of Billy Comstock, a well-known guide, scout, and interpreter. To settle the controversy, a contest was arranged between the two with the title of "Buffalo Bill" and \$500 at stake. Cody killed sixty-nine buffaloes while his opponent scored only forty-six. Thereafter his title was never disputed.

The Earl of Dunraven, who hunted big game in Wyoming during the early seventies, described Buffalo Bill as being "a noble Vandyke stepped from its frame", one "of the handsomest and best built men" he had ever seen. Although Cody was "a thorough gentleman, quiet, calm and self-possessed, he was nevertheless sudden and quick in a quarrel" and then "his large lustrous eyes so full of slumbering fire" would "flash into flame". It was hard to imagine this courtly man, with his "firm, sensitive mouth, delicately molded chin, pointed beard of

silky brown" and "magnificent hair sweeping in natural curves over his strong, square shoulders", as a scout and Indian fighter inured to all the hardships of the frontier. Yet this "masterful rider" and "expert shot" had few peers on the plains.

Small wonder that his friend, "Ned Buntline" (E. Z. C. Judson) chose this picturesque figure as the hero of many of his stories of the wild west. Buntline kept writing to Buffalo Bill urging him to appear on the stage in his own character. Finally, in 1872, Buffalo Bill decided there might be money in it and resolved to go. Refusing to serve in the Nebraska legislature to which he had been elected, he went to Chicago, arriving there on a Wednesday. Ned Buntline met him and informed him that the show would open on the following Monday.

"Monday", exclaimed Buffalo Bill. "I can't learn my part by then. Where's the play?"

"Oh, it's not written yet", replied Buntline. "But don't worry, we'll do it right away."

They hurried to a hotel where Buntline hired the clerks as penmen, telling them that they "were going to write a play and do it quick." The play was named *Scouts of the Plains*. A theater was rented for \$600 a week and on Monday night the show opened. Buffalo Bill and Texas Jack figured as the stars.

Whether from stage fright or from want of study, when Bill got out on the stage he could not remember a word of his lines. Buntline repeatedly gave

him the cue, but to no avail. Finally, in desperation, he slapped Bill on the back and shouted as though it were part of the play, "Where have you been, Bill? What's kept you so long?"

Glancing up at one of the boxes, Bill spied a friend named Milligan, a popular and well-known man in Chicago. "I've been on a hunt with Milligan!" he shouted.

The audience roared approval and for the remainder of the act, Buntline and Cody improvised conversation, not a word of the original parts being spoken. "The reviewers were kind to the actors. Of the author they said that they had heard he had written the play in four hours, and they wondered why it took him so long."

Strange as it may seem, the play was a success and showed for a week in Chicago before going to St. Louis. There they played to packed houses week after week. But in April, 1876, Cody's baby boy died, and soon afterward he left the stage and went west as chief of scouts for General Sheridan.

After the campaign against the Indians, however, Buffalo Bill returned to the theater business. His first appearance was in a "new drama founded on incidents in the late Indian War, entitled *The Red Right Hand, or, Buffalo Bill's First Scalp for Custer*." He exhibited the "feathered head-dress, arms and ornaments which he had stripped from the body of Yellow Hand" in their famous duel. But when he reached New England, the press and clergy

set up such "a mighty protest against 'the blood-stained trophies of his murderous and cowardly deeds' " that he quit displaying them.

Perhaps his most successful play was *May Cody, or, Lost and Won*, presented in 1877. For the week beginning October 15, 1877, "Hon. Wm. F. Cody (Buffalo Bill) And His Great Combination" appeared at the Eagle Theatre in New York City, according to an advertisement in the *New York Tribune*. Cody considered this "his first 'artistic' production".

The season of 1878-1879 was also very successful, the troupe being larger than ever before, augmented with real Indians. The play was called *Knights of the Plains* and its immense popularity probably had much to do with Buffalo Bill's decision to give the world a truer picture of the West in the form of his Wild West Show.

Believing that it was not "fine acting", but the appearance of real Indians, guides, scouts, cowboys, buffaloes, and bucking broncos, that the people wanted to see, he proceeded to gather a large group for his show. The first rehearsal was held behind the railroad station at his home in North Platte, Nebraska. As new ideas came one by one, the show gradually took shape. An enormous amount of money was required to pay for equipment, hire actors, and transport them, and when the show opened on May 17, 1883, at the Fairgrounds in Omaha, Cody had invested every cent he possessed

in the venture. After playing to vast crowds in Omaha, the show moved to Chicago where every bit of available space was sold out for the opening performance. Buffalo Bill received a tremendous ovation when he appeared.

All through the East the show continued to play to enormous crowds, but at the end of the season Buffalo Bill found that he had grown no richer financially, though he had gained considerable experience. He was convinced that he needed a partner to manage the show, and such a partner he found in the well-known comedian, Nate Salsbury.

Under the new management, the company was reorganized on a much grander scale than before — nearly a hundred Indians from several tribes being engaged. Among them was the famous chief, Sitting Bull. For the season of 1886-1887, they leased Madison Square Garden in New York. An advertisement in the New York *Tribune* for Friday, November 19, 1886, advised the public that: "W. F. Cody and Nate Salsbury, proprietors and managers," would open on Monday evening, November 22, 1886, at Madison Square Garden and "nightly thereafter" with "the most stupendous and in every respect grandest, most unique, thrilling, sensational, perfect and superbly artistic and realistic exhibition ever seen or attempted in the metropolis of America."

Apparently their advertisement did not greatly overstate the attractiveness of their production for

a reporter observed that "the swiftly changing scenes have color and variety and novelty enough for the boldest of sensational plays." That the show had been improved under the new management was evidenced by the statement that it could "scarcely be recognized as the same show as last year" which was an "odd, sketchy, haphazard picture of life in the far West", while "that of last night was spectacular rather, a spirited series of tableaux and pantomimes, with far greater dramatic interest and a stronger quality of picturesqueness." The huge house was crowded to the roof on the opening night. "Fully 6000 people were present and the whole circle of boxes was gay with men and women in evening dress." Among the notables present were Henry Ward Beecher, General W. T. Sherman, and General P. H. Sheridan. The attendance continued unabated and they played to crowded houses all through the winter.

This unprecedented success aroused in Buffalo Bill and his partner a desire to produce their show abroad. Therefore, when the sponsors of the American Exhibition to be held in London proposed that the Wild West Show be given in connection with the Exhibition, they eagerly accepted the offer. Preparations for the trip were begun immediately.

It was no small task to transport more than two hundred Indians, cowboys, Mexican riders, and celebrated rifle shots across the Atlantic, besides the buffaloes, Texas steers, burros, bronchos, racing

horses, elk, bears, and an immense amount of equipment. But on March 31, 1887, the motley crowd and cargo set sail from New York, while the cowboy band played "The Girl I Left Behind Me" as the ship drew away from the pier.

All on board were glad when the boat anchored off Gravesend and a tug flying the stars and stripes came out to meet them. Buffalo Bill and his company were received with enthusiasm by the people and press of London. Every day the English papers contained eulogistic accounts of the show and predicted that it would "take the town by storm".

And so it did. The big London amphitheatre, a third of a mile in circumference, had been so decorated as to form a veritable reproduction of the scenery of the western plains. "The show began, after the grand entry, with the hour of dawn on the Plains", wrote Buffalo Bill in his *Autobiography*, describing the opening performance in London. "Wild animals were scattered about. Within their tents were the Indians sleeping. As the dawn deepened the Indians came out of their tents and went through one of their solemn and impressive war-dances. While this was going on the British audience held its breath. You could have heard a whisper in almost any part of the arena.

"Then in came a courier to announce the neighborhood of a hostile tribe. Instantly there was a wild scramble for mounts and weapons. The enemy rushed in, and for ten minutes there was a sham

battle which filled the place with noise and confusion. This battle was copied as exactly as it could be copied from one of the scrimmages in which I had taken part in my first days as a scout. Then we gave them a buffalo hunt, in which I had a hand, and did a little fancy shooting. As a finish there was a wild Western cyclone, and a whole Indian village was blown out of existence for the delectation of the English audience."

The Prince of Wales and his wife, Princess Alexandria, attended this initial performance and so glowing were their reports of the show to his mother, Queen Victoria, that she commanded Buffalo Bill to appear before her at Windsor Castle. She wanted to see the entry from her chamber, so "Buffalo Bill at the head of the motley procession paraded under the Queen's window." A special box was prepared in the center of the arena from which the Queen viewed the performance and Nate Salisbury stood by her to explain each act as it was presented. The Queen "appeared to be greatly interested" and "said that it was a wonderful show". She "admired the daring riding of the cowboys, and was especially delighted with their performances on the bucking ponies." After the performance was over, she complimented Buffalo Bill and "presented him with a large gold seal, containing her monogram."

Later, he was again commanded to appear before the Queen and a number of her royal guests, in-

cluding the Kings of Saxony, Denmark, and Greece, the Queen of the Belgians, and the Crown Prince of Austria. In recognition of this performance, the Prince of Wales sent Buffalo Bill a feathered crest outlined in diamonds, with the words "Ich dien" worked in jewels underneath. A note in the Prince's handwriting accompanied the gift, expressing the pleasure of the Prince and his guests at the entertainment.

During the months spent in London, Buffalo Bill found himself "the hero of the London season". Gladstone and other distinguished statesmen called on him, and he was besieged by invitations to breakfasts, dinners, luncheons, and garden parties. The *London Times*, following his final performance in that city, observed that "the show was the attraction which made the fortune of the Exhibition" and expressed the opinion that Colonel Cody could "achieve no greater triumph than this".

After a tour of the principal cities in England, the troupe again returned to America. Of all the honors Buffalo Bill received abroad, he most prized a letter from General Sherman complimenting him on the work he had done in depicting the history of the West. "You have caught one epoch of the world's history, have illustrated it in the very heart of the modern world — London — and I want you to feel that on this side the water we appreciate it."

Five years later visitors at the World's Fair in Chicago found Buffalo Bill and his troupe encamped

near the exhibition grounds. During the six months from April to November, 1893, over six million people attended the show. Its success was due to the fact that Cody never "failed to realize every promise" that he made. Not one of the features of the performance was "omitted from the entertainment at any time," whatever the condition of the weather may have been, "and promptly at three o'clock in the afternoon and at eight o'clock in the evening, the veteran scout" galloped out into the arena. The performances never failed to be "interesting" and at no time "lost the snap and vigor that constant repetition so often tames".

Further homage was paid to William F. Cody by his countrymen on August 31, 1898, during the Trans-Mississippi Exposition. That day was set aside to honor the man "whose rifle and heart had helped more than any other man's to open the west for the telegraph, the railroad, and peaceful settlement". Vast multitudes cheered as he rode up to the grandstand, and orators linked his name with those of Washington, Grant, and Lincoln as one who, like them, "had contributed greatly to the nation's progress."

But soon after this, illness beset him and he recovered to find himself mired in debt. By 1907, his great show had degenerated to a circus. Then his mines and every other venture were wiped away until finally everything was gone, even the circus. But Buffalo Bill, courageous as ever, vowed that he

would pay back every cent. The next few years were sad indeed for this man who had been fêted by royalty abroad and hailed as a hero at home. He even applied for the monthly pension of ten dollars that goes to holders of the Congressional Medal of Honor.

At first, he worked with the Sells-Floto circus on a salary and later obtained a job with the 101 Ranch Show. So broken in health that his friends had to help him into the saddle before each performance, he would nevertheless sit straight and tall in his saddle during his appearance in the ring only to collapse after his number was over. Doggedly determined not to give up, he kept on until the end of the season in 1916, when he went to his sister's home in Denver.

"Don't believe exaggerated reports about my illness", he wired his wife in Cody, Nebraska. "They're trying to tell me I'm going to die. But I've still got my boots on and they can't kill me. They've tried it before, you know."

And later, when he was going to Glenwood Springs and the reporters clustered around him in the depot, he laughed and said he "was going to start next season with the biggest show he had ever known." But twenty-four hours later, a message came to his wife from his physician that Colonel Cody was "slowly but surely dying". They were bringing him back to Denver.

There his wife met him, "a frail, white-faced

man, long white hair clinging about his temples, lips thin and colorless, but fighting to the end". He laughed at her tears, "Doctor says I'm going to die, does he? Well, I've still got my boots on. I'll be all right!" Daily he struggled into his clothes so that death might find him up and ready to meet it, as he had always been ready to face everything that life presented.

At midnight, on January 10, 1917, he died. In accordance with his own desire, he was buried atop Mount Lookout overlooking the great plains of Kansas, Nebraska, Colorado, and Wyoming—the mighty stage on which he played a prominent rôle in the drama of the West.

DOROTHY WAGNER